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ABSTRACT

Administrators at both state-funded and tuition-driven private institutions are now adhering to a bottom-line approach to education. In many cases, budget-minded administrators refuse to move forward on any educational initiative until this question is addressed: "What are you doing to encourage retention?" It is becoming clear that directors and teachers of composition must either implicitly or explicitly deal with the retention issue if their programs are to survive. The general curriculum of the first-year composition course and the pedagogical principles in that course already address the retention problem in many ways. Several studies have shown that both the degree of student contact with faculty and the degree of peer involvement correlate with the rate of retention. Composition courses encourage student contact with faculty through conferences, good student-teacher ratios, and through the redefinition of the role of the teacher as one who facilitates and advises. Composition courses also take the lead in peer group activities through peer editing, peer evaluation, small group discussion and collaborative writing. Instructors and directors may want to infuse into the composition course particular assignments that are relevant to retention, for example, a group paper concentrating on the transition from high school to college. (TB)

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First-Year Composition and Student Retention: The Neglected Goal

Why Mention Composition and Retention in the Same Breath?

Some reasons:

1. The Bottom-Line Juggernaut--Administrators at both state-funded public and tuition-driven private institutions are now adhering to a bottom-line approach to education. No program is considered intrinsically valuable, no discipline is considered indispensible. The rhetoric of those in power typically boils down to such catch phrases as "students are in a buyer's market," "do more with less," and so on. In this environment, which, unfortunately, shows no signs of abating anytime soon, retention--the goal of ensuring a stable student population from year to year--has emerged as a a "god term" to use Richard Weaver's phrase. In many cases, budget-minded administrators refuse to move forward on any educational initiative until this question is addressed: "What are you doing to encourage retention?"

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A specific case in point: At my home institution, we have never had a writing-across-the-curriculum program. When the English department underwent an external review--at the request of the adminstration--the reviewers strongly recommended that we start a WAC program immediately, since we were woefully behind the times. However, during our consultation with the provost, we were told that though he understood the importance of WAC, he could not move forward on any funding until the University had developed a comprehensive and coherent way to address the first-year retention problem.

2. Given reason #1, it becomes clear that directors and teachers of composition must either implicity or explicitly deal with the retention issue if programs are to survive. Most compositionists tend to be rather cavalier about this whole issue. Retention is never discussed, as far as I know, in graduate composition courses, and new faculty are arriving on campuses unprepared to illustrate value of first-year composition, Writing Centers, and WAC programs with regard to retention. Typically, our attitude has been that it is our job to separate the wheat from the chaff anyway. And, if the recent discussions about the future of first-year composition are any indication, this "survival of the fittest" attitude persists. At the1993 4Cs, in a panel entitled "(Dis)Missing Freshman

English: Alternatives to the Universal Requirement," David Jolliffe suggested offering first-year comp at the sophomore level, since by that time unprepared students will have flunked out or transfered. Joliffe is indeed correct; most studies show that on the average about 40% of students leave college after the first year (Tinto 443).

However, this dismissive attitude to the first-year experience, and to freshman composition in general, is disturbing on two levels: First, when one suggests that first-year composition should not be required, administrators may all too often strongly agree and begin the process of gutting the English department, an act that could be the death knell of a department at small college, where half of a faculty member's load is composition. Second, because first-year composition is so vital to the longevity of an English Department (a recent MLA study revealed that first-year composition was the course taken most frequently by undergraduates), we must, instead of arguing for our own demise, steel ourselves against the budget axe by emphazing first-year composition's important role in acculturating new students to the university and keeping them there. What I am going to do here, then, is illustrate how the general curriculum of the first-year composition course, and the pedagogical principles implicit in that course (or courses) already address the retention problem in many ways, and how, specifically we can infuse

issues of retention into the first-year writing course.

What Happens in a First-Year Writing Course that is Already Amenable to the Goals of Retention?

No one can isolate one variable that keeps students at a particular institution; however, studies do show that student satisfaction and success go hand-in-hand with the following: (1) Consistent contact with faculty and (2) peer group involvement.

Consistent Contact with Faculty

In Increasing Student Retention, Noel et al. argue that "Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable, or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty are more satisfied with all aspects of their institutional experience. . ." (384). This finding was also confirmed at my home institution, where a year-end survey of first-year students revealed that "contact with faculty" was the number one reason they had decided to stay for their sophomore year.

I think it is one of composition's greatest strengths that in the most

effective first-year composition courses, student-faculty contact is maximized. Facilitating this contact occurs in numerous ways:

1. Through our profession's insistence on small class sizes. The 4C's Statement on Professional Standards sets a limit of 20 students, a highly reasonable number, given the time it takes to effectively grade student papers. However, we often fail to underscore the ancillary benefit small class size has on the goal of retention. Smaller classes typically mean, by their very nature, that students will have more opportunity to interact with the instructor, to engage in meaningful relationship with faculty and peers. Additionally, that small class size equates with the retention of students is an argument that administrators will find more convincing than any pedagogical argument when they, as they always do, attempt to raise class ceilings in first-year composition courses.

2. Through our redefinition of the role of the teacher. When we talk about sharing authority for learning with students, being less teacher-centered, and so forth, what we are really arguing is that the teacher in the composition course does not disappear, but redefines him or herself in a variety of roles: advisor, mentor, tutor, and so on. These roles break down barriers between teacher and student, allowing more contact, both

informal and formal.

For instance, in both basic and first-year composition, I hold one-to-one conferences with my students concerning drafts of their papers at least four times a semester. Conferences have a clear pedagogical benefit, as we all know, yet they are pure gold in terms of their relationship with retention goals. In no other discipline, in no other major, in no other English class, does more one-to-one contact occur than in composition courses. Composition instructors go above and beyond the call of duty in their pursuit of a meaningful relationship with each student in each of their classes. And no instructor ever asks for more financial support for this highly time-consuming and oftentimes draining experience. Obviously, we must do more to point out how unique composition pedagogy is in its attention to individual students.

The second key ingredient in a retention program is the emphasis on peer group involvement.

Obviously composition takes the lead with classroom opportunities for peer group involvement as we intregate such activities into our curriculum as peer responding and editing, small group discussion, and collaborative writing. I have found it useful on many levels to require at least one collaboratively-written paper in each composition class. One

benefit of the collaborative paper that I did not anticipate was its usefulness in helping students form bounds. This bonding, feeling part of a group, is especially important in the freshman year--that is why student-athletes have such high retention rates. In fact, many of my students, when evaluating their experience composing the collaborative paper, point out that they not only gained a valuable writing experience, but made new friends as well.

What Can We Do In Terms of Specific Assignments?

We have seen how the fundamental principles of teaching writing itself lend themselves to retention. However, should the very "content" of the composition course be geared toward retention issues?

Obviously, the "content" of a writing course is the skill of writing itself--any other "topic" of the course is ostenible. However, we all know that the first-year composition course is the site of many battles--As Denise David, Barbara Gordon, and Rita Pollard point out in their Dec. '95 3C's article "Seeking Common Ground," everyone seems to want to teach everything but writing in the first-year composition course, and that is if they support the idea of a first-year course anyway.

That is why I must assert that the focus of a writing course should

be writing, but also point out, given that fundamental premise, that there are ways to infuse the composition course with particular assignments relevant to retention. Rather than bore you with too many details, though, I will refer you to my 1995 article in Research and Teaching in Developmental Education , which presents a first-year comp/retention curriculum in closer focus. In summary, though, I built a first-year writing course around a sequence of papers that dealt with personal experiences regarding the transition from high school to college, collaborative research into the history, traditions, and rituals of the college, and then finished with argumentative papers dealing with controversial issues raging at the college at that time. All these assignments were designed with the idea that through them, students would gradually feel that that college experience was part of their identity, and that they had a stake as citizens in this new community.

To finish, I want to stress that though retention may not be at the top of the agenda of every college administrator now, it may very well be in the near future. Although I have been employed only at tuition-driven schools, they can serve as an indication of how the bottom-line mentality has called into question the necessity of any program. And let me stress that I do not see addressing the concern of retention merely as a way of

perserving turf or pleasing the higher-ups. Keeping our students in college, keeping their eyes toward a successful furture is of course a noble goal in itself--the days of perceiving any course as a "weed-out" course are over.

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